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SUBJECT: QATAR'S PRESS FREEDOM TRIPPED UP BY HUMAN RIGHTS
REPORT EVENT

Classified By: CDA MICHAEL A. RATNEY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Coverage of CDA's April 8 press conference on the Human Rights Report vividly demonstrated Qatar's continuing media freedom challenges, particularly censorship and self-censorship. English-language newspapers generally highlighted both positive and negative aspects of Qatar's human rights performance, while the Arabic press featured much less balance. One paper editorialized in its article, another chose to report only on the positive aspects of the report, while a third ran balanced coverage - a first for Doha's Arabic press. Following the press conference, journalists told Charge that they had been forbidden from covering the report when it was officially released on March 11, noting that strict censorship of issues deemed sensitive to Qatar was common. One Arab journalist told Charge at the conclusion of the event, "Please do not hold it against us if nothing appears in the papers tomorrow." While we would have preferred balanced, professional coverage of the human rights report, this outcome now provides Embassy with an invaluable case study for discussing restrictions on press freedom with Qatari officials and editors. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) Journalists from all seven of Qatar's dailies attended Charge's April 8 press roundtable to discuss the recently released 2007 Human Rights Report, which was distributed to them ahead of time in English and Arabic. Charge began with brief remarks about the history of the Human Rights Report, its scope, and Qatar's thorniest human rights issue: the trafficking and treatment of expatriate laborers. All of the reporters at the event were themselves expatriates from the United Kingdom, India, Egypt, Algeria and Lebanon.

THE REGULAR QUESTIONS

¶3. (U) Charge fielded a number of predictable questions, including what the USG's stance is on a new draft of a labor sponsorship law, why the report did not take into account developments since the beginning of the year, and whether or not the report is a tool for pressuring certain countries on particular issues. One reporter, who asked a series of pointedly negative questions, wanted to know why the USG criticized the media's use of anti-Israeli political cartoons. Charge explained that these cartoons were not criticism of Israeli Government policy, a legitimate use of political commentary, but were hateful and degrading caricatures of the Jewish people, which is offensive and irresponsible.

AND A FEW SURPRISES

¶4. (C) The most revealing comments about human rights in Qatar made at the press conference came not from the Charge,

but from the journalists themselves when the Charge turned off the tape recorders and asked them to comment, off the record, on their experiences with press freedom in this country. One Indian journalist from "The Peninsula" asserted that his editor -- a Qatari national -- had quashed an article he had prepared after the launch of the Human Rights Reports in Washington on March 11. This is typical, he said, for any issue deemed sensitive to the Qataris, of which human rights is one. He also claimed to have been arrested on three occasions in the 1990s for reporting on labor conditions in the country. "I shut up after that because I did not want to be sent home," he added.

15. (C) Other journalists chimed in with similar comments about censorship from their Qatari bosses. An Egyptian reporter told Charge, "Please do not hold it against us if nothing appears in the papers tomorrow." Later, at a wrap-up session with the Embassy's Information Assistant, the same journalist, speaking in hushed tones, said, "I really cannot tell you whether or not anything will be printed tomorrow. I don't have a clear sense of how this will go." Asked why he was speaking so quietly, he responded, "You never know who is listening." He was very sensitive about upsetting his superiors, he said, because he does not want to lose his job and be sent back to Egypt.

PRESS COVERAGE: GOOD, BAD, UGLY

16. (U) On April 7, all papers ran some coverage of the event, with the English press generally providing the most extensive and balanced reporting. "Gulf Times" carried a front-page, above-the-fold article with photo, with the

DOHA 00000291 002 OF 002

headline, "U.S. Calls for Qatar to Relax Labor Laws." The end of the article, however, featured bolded text directing the reader to a story inside the paper on alleged CIA renditions to Jordan. The two other English-language dailies carried similar headlines with straightforward reporting.

17. (U) "Al Arab," an Arabic daily established six months ago, carried a front-page article with the headline, "U.S. Charge d'Affaires Criticized the Sponsorship Law in Qatar," while a sub-headline read, "Ratney quoted a hadith, the traditions of the Prophet Mohammed, saying, 'A worker should be paid before the sweat on his brow dries.'" "Al Arab" was the only Arabic daily to provide straightforward reporting of the Charge's comments and the Human Rights Report, providing an Internet link to the full report in Arabic.

18. (U) The other Arabic dailies provided varying degrees of less balance. On the more balanced end was "Al Raya," which made mention of the labor problems, while noting that the "ship of Qatari-U.S. relations" was sailing smoothly. "Al Watan" chose to avoid any mention of labor, headlining with, "Qatar Made Progress in Many Areas." "Al Sharq's" coverage was the least balanced, with a headline claiming, "The U.S. Praises Steps Taken by Qatar on Human Rights," and editorial comment creeping into the body of the article. The reporter praised, for example, the Charge's use of a hadith to describe labor problems, but criticized him for not equally applying Islamic standards to condemn homosexuals, whose mistreatment in Qatar was also cited in the report. "Al Sharq" ran on the same day an op-ed titled, "America and Its Suspicious Reports," alleging that the USG is hypocritical when it comes to human rights, and only uses these reports to pressure and embarrass countries.

COMMENT

19. (C) This was the first public event in recent memory in Qatar to focus on the annual Human Rights Report. We

expected the Arabic press -- which is what most Qataris read -- to either completely ignore it, or to avoid any discussion of our critical observations. The fact that "Al Arab's" young Algerian journalist had the courage to file a balanced story and his Qatari editor, a good friend of the Embassy, had the integrity to run it, is something of a watershed. Charge and Embassy officers will use the stark differences in the coverage of this event to highlight to Qatari leaders and editors that media freedom includes the willingness to criticize and question what happens in Qatar, not just other countries.

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